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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 000563

SIPDIS

NSC FOR TSHANNON AND CBARTON  
HQ USSOUTHCOM ALSO FOR POLAD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/22/2015  
TAGS: PGOV, PHUM, KIRF, VE  
SUBJECT: CARDINAL SEES REBUILDING YEAR FOR CATHOLIC CHURCH

REF: CARACAS 00090

Classified By: A/DCM Abelardo A. Arias for Reason 1.4(b).

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Summary  
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1. (C) Retired Venezuelan Jose Cardinal Castillo Lara sees the Catholic Church in Venezuela keeping a low profile in 2005. Appointments of a new papal nuncio and archbishop of Caracas will likely tone down the heated rhetoric exchanged by the bishops and the GOV throughout Venezuela's political crisis. Castillo Lara believes the Church hierarchy will continue to press the GOV on human rights and democracy issues, though it will avoid a larger political or uniting role among opposition groups. End summary.

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Catholics Will Press On Human Rights, Democracy  
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2. (C) Poloff met with retired Venezuelan Cardinal Jose Castillo Lara February 16 to discuss the outlook for the Catholic Church's role in Venezuelan politics in 2005. Castillo Lara, who retired to his native Venezuela after 40 years in key Vatican posts, predicted that the Catholic Church will be less confrontational with the GOV than in previous years. The replacement of the Papal Nuncio and the possible naming of an Archbishop of Caracas are important

transitions that will occupy the Church's agenda, the Cardinal said. He asserted, however, that the Church, by way of the bishops' council (CEV), would continue to speak out against threats to human rights and democracy. He did not discount that certain bishops, working individually, might be more active with opposition groups. The Cardinal said he foresees no problems for the free expression of the Catholic faith in Venezuela.

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New Papal Nuncio Announced  
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3. (C) According to press reports on February 15, the Vatican had submitted to the GOV the name of Giacinto Berloco as the new Papal Nuncio in Caracas. Pro-GOV daily VEA hailed the news of the departure of Nuncio Andres Dupuy, accusing him of plotting to overthrow President Hugo Chavez and alleging that the Church replaced Dupuy for being a failure. Church representatives denied that Dupuy's exit is political, but rather a normal rotation in the Vatican's diplomatic service.

Castillo said Dupuy's departure is within the normal term of four-plus years in a country. But, he said, Executive Vice President Jose Vicente Rangel had, in fact, asked the Vatican to replace Dupuy in late 2003. Castillo said he intervened personally with Pope John Paul II to hold off on removing Dupuy until after the referendum, citing the importance of continuity during the electoral period.

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Archbishop of Caracas Pending  
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4. (C) The position of Archbishop of Caracas has been vacant since the death of Caracas Archbishop Ignacio Cardinal Velasco in November 2002. Castillo said the 1964 modus vivendi between the Church and the GOV gives Chavez 30 days to veto episcopal appointments. (Castillo said he has privately encouraged the Pope to abrogate this agreement in part because of Chavez's authoritarian ways.) Chavez's antagonism toward Catholic leadership, especially toward the late Cardinal Velasco, had effectively stopped action on naming a new archbishop, according to Castillo. He flatly denied rumors that San Cristobal (Tachira State) Archbishop Mario Moronta would be named Archbishop of Caracas. Chavez frequently mentions Moronta, who visited Chavez in prison after the latter's failed coup attempt, as sympathetic to the revolution. Castillo said Moronta lost all credibility with the other bishops when he repeatedly failed to speak out over persecution of the so-called "Tachira 9" who were convicted in 2004 for their participation in the events of April 2002. Castillo Lara conceded that appointing current CEV President Baltazar Porras, Archbishop of Merida, would be very difficult given his hard-line stance against Chavez.

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Comment

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5. (C) Castillo is convinced that Chavez is mentally unstable and has compiled a list of ten characteristics of the GOV, including despotic, corrupt, and wasteful. He accuses the GOV of "sowing class hatred" to destroy political enemies. Castillo is convinced the GOV mounted fraud during the August 2004 recall referendum and the October 2004 regional elections, concerns he has stated publicly. He has also concluded that Venezuela is no longer a democracy. Castillo's career was spent in the Vatican and he has a hard-line anti-Chavez take on Venezuelan politics. At 82, he is not a spokesperson for the Catholic Church, but rather a periodic voice of moral authority against Chavez. We expect the Church will continue with its regular biannual statements on human rights. But the Church seems willing to take a pause on frontal assaults until the new Church officials are on board.

McFarland

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